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ENG 2011G-001: Literature and Human Values: Fiction

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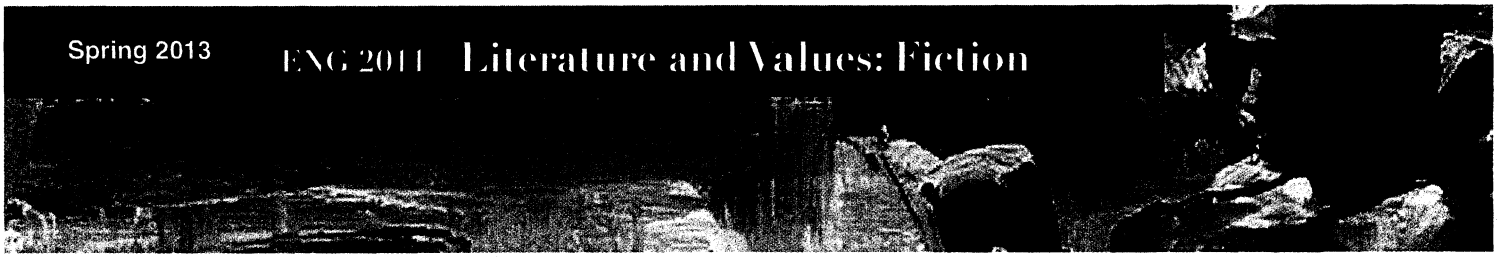
Eastern Illinois University

2011G-001



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Among the many signs that our generation imagines itself as the most important yet: the prediction, popular among techies and bibliophobes, that soon there will be no more books. Our iPads and Kindles make for such a superior "reading experience," we hear it said, that they will displace the bound and printed articles that have been with us for so long now. Such prophesies fail to understand what books are, in that they fail to grasp how deeply books—as conveyers of narrative especially—have over the past few centuries shaped how we experience our lives. For all I know, within a few years we will all be using newer and more sophisticated tablet technology to access reading material along with a slew of video entertainment, but this will do little to alter the way narrative has shaped our consciousness—the ways in which, for instance, we often imagine ourselves to inhabit stories—and this experience of narrative as the trope that orders our existence has everything to do with the advent of long-form prose fiction in the eighteenth century and the perfection of the form in the nineteenth.

For it was during those centuries that the novel arose as the preeminent delivery system for suspension of disbelief—that odd psychological experience of losing oneself in consideration of squiggles on paper whose symbolic function is to describe people, places, events, and transactions that are not. Think of the way you experience narrative: you read the book, watch the film, follow the series with a sense of emotional and psychological investment. You are perfectly aware that Bella and her vampire boyfriend are not real, and yet when the last film ends, you feel as if you've said goodbye to an actual friend. Think, for that matter, about the curious admixture of public and private sensibility that attends the act of reading fiction among other people, perhaps even in public—on a bus, a train, a plane (why is it that fiction always seems to attend moments of geographical passage?), the student union, here in this class. You're "with us" physically, here in public space, and yet you're "in there": in the recesses of imagination, perhaps in a tumult of emotional responses that are exceedingly personal. A fellow passenger on a recent flight began, next to me, to read *Fifty Shades of Gray*, and studens, at some level I felt embarrassed.

All of these curious psychological and emotional phenomena are what distinguish life in a society that produces and reads fiction, and they are facets of our psychology that iPads and Kindles will certainly reshape, but my guess is that these items will not erase our collective investment in narrative. So in this course, as we study a range of works of fiction produced in English-speaking cultures and comprising something like a makeshift history of the form, we will in a most direct sense be studying ourselves. We'll read romantic works from the nineteenth century, modern works from the twentieth, postmodern from our own era, and all manner of experiments that appeared along the way. My hope is that you'll enjoy the trip, and that by the end you'll have developed new ways of describing what fiction means to you.

Course Requirements & Policies

Final Grades this semester will be determined in accordance with this formula:

Review history	10%
Work of Fiction	10%
First Essay	15%
Midterm Exam	15%
Final Essay	20%
Final Exam	20%
Citizenship	10%
	100%

You'll write two essays for this class. The first will be due on March 6, and will offer you the chance to work through some thoughts around one of the works we've discussed up until that point. The final essay will be due on the last day of class, April 27, will similarly ask you to develop a statement about a particular work of fiction, but will also require you to engage with the perspective of other readers and scholars. I'll also supply you more detailed descriptions of the parameters and expectations associated with these essay assignments.

You'll take a midterm and a final, on March 8 and during finals week. Each of these will test you objectively on the reading and, in an essay section, ask you to synthesize what we've studied into well-crafted essays responding to specific questions.

I'm going to assign each member of the class a short report, about five minutes long, for which you will walk us through a critical review of a work under consideration. This should consist, at a minimum, of providing the class a copy of a book review written at the time of the work's publication, but you will also be expected to describe the nature of that review and to assess it. In the case of many of the works we'll read, you will need to use Eastern's historical archives in order to access the magazines and newspapers containing such sources, and so before long I will provide information on how to do so.

Lastly, you're required to write and publish your own work of fiction for this course. You are invited to get creative with your mode of publication—fiction is published in books, of course, but it is also published in newspapers, on blogs, in student-run literary journals like the *Vehicle*, on Facebook pages, through tweets, handed out on campus quads, read aloud in Student Unions, and so on. More parameters for this assignment will be forthcoming, but at a minimum students will both produce a creative work for public distribution and write a bit about how their chosen mode of delivery intersects with their choice of subject matter or their aims as a writer. The due date for this assignment is April 5.

Citizenship. Just as a democracy depends upon the active and thoughtful engagement of its citizenry, university seminars depend upon students who meet their obligations to prepare for and carry out an informed and rigorous discussion. Sometimes in this seminar I'll lecture, but most of the time we'll exchange perceptions. So to do this well, you'll need to have read everything in advance and with the skill and perseverance I would expect of a grown-up—having sharpened your reactions by taking notes, committing questions to paper as they arise, drawing connections with other reading assignments and things that other people have said, integrating such observations with the material I teach you through lecture and handouts, and so on. You must, of course, bring the text under discussion to class.

Think of the class as a kind of a book club. We read, we meet, and we exchange perceptions. But doing that well involves preparation beyond simply completing the reading. First of all, you need to complete that reading without distractions. There should be no electronic interference in the form of texts, tweets, emails, Facebook, phone calls, or television disrupting your ability to take in exactly what is on the page.

And reading also involves some of the activities I mention above, such as taking notes, recording the questions that occur to you, and so on. All of this will help you to perform in class, and if it helps, you should understand the verb "to perform" literally. In other words, prior to class you must prepare for a performance in which you do a kind of intellectual dance with your fellow students and with me. A small class like ours offers certain advantages, and one is that no one can hide from their obligation to help foment the kind of interesting discussions I require. If you find it intimidating to speak about texts you've already studied in a welcoming, supportive context such as this seminar will be—or if you fail to recognizing that this is about as welcoming and supportive as things will get in this world, outside of your home—than with respect I have to say you have difficult days ahead of you.

We should communicate outside of class to talk about your ideas, perceptions, and questions. Whenever possible we should use my office hours for this purpose, or make an appointment if you're otherwise committed during that time block. The second avenue at our disposal should be via phone, and in fact, here's my personal mobile: 217.549.0130. Our last conduit should be by e-mail, because it's the least efficient way of exchanging views. I'm not absolutely against it, but here's my requirement: if you send me e-mail, I want you to write it well. It should start with a salutation, and in fact, during at least the first few weeks, that salutation should be "Dear Professor Hanlon." Later, when we get to know each other and if we get friendlier, I don't mind "Hey, Dr. Hanlon" or whatever, but until then I value a bit more formality. At the end of the e-mail, you should sign your name. In between these two elements, you should write in complete sentences, and you should avoid text-speak, most of which I do not understand and to which I probably won't respond.

Want some free advice that can have serious ramifications for your quality of life over the next few decades? I would recommend drafting all e-mails you send—whenever they are at all important—at least a few hours in advance and then coming back to them before hitting send. Do this, students, and trust me: you'll be *amazed* at how drastically your correspondence improves, and at how much more often you'll be sent the replies you would prefer.

Attendance Policy: Don't be absent. Being a strong class citizen means being here for each class meeting. If you must know in advance, however, four or more absences will reduce final grades; in no case may a student accumulate six and still pass the course. Also, students who habitually walk into class a few minutes after it's started should find a professor who's into that and take their class instead.

Lastly, students are of course responsible for knowing Eastern Illinois University regulations and policies regarding academic honesty. Plagiarism, even if unknowing or accidental, can result in your failing the course and in further action by the university. Please note the English Department's statement on plagiarism:

> Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—"The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one's own original work" (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignments, of a grade of F for the assigned essay and a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office.

If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, feel free to ask me to clarify. Also, please make a point of noting the following: I will not tolerate any form of academic dishonesty in this course. If I come to suspect misconduct of any kind, I will become dogged about rooting it out, and if my suspicions are confirmed, I will dispense appropriate penalties.

Required Texts:

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)
Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, and Anne Brontë, *The Brontë Sisters: Three Novels* (1847)
Katherine Dunn, *Geek Love* (1989)
Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)
Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (2005)

All other readings supplied through Booth Library e-reserves (password: ch2011), to be printed in time for you to read, take notes, and bring to class.

Reading Schedule

Jan 7	Introductions
Jan 9	Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* pp. 5-52
Jan 11	*Pride and Prejudice* 53-112
Jan 14-16	No class meetings—I'm giving a paper at the University of Manchester Read and think about *Pride and Prejudice* 113-72
Jan 18	*Pride and Prejudice* 173-227
Jan 23	*Pride and Prejudice* 228-303 Review History Presentations
Jan 25	*Pride and Prejudice* 304-67 Review History Presentations
Jan 28	Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* pp. 3-56
Jan 30	*Jane Eyre* 56-112
Feb 1	*Jane Eyre* 113-72
Feb 4	*Jane Eyre* 173-227 Review History Presentations
Feb 6	*Jane Eyre* 228-303 Review History Presentations
Feb 8	*Jane Eyre* 304-67 Review History Presentations

Feb 11	Raymond Carver, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (1981)
Feb 13	James Joyce, "Araby" (1914)
Feb 18	Dunn, *Geek Love* pp. 3-55
Feb 20	*Geek Love* 56-116
Feb 22	*Geek Love* 117-76
Feb 25	*Geek Love* 177-200
Feb 27	*Geek Love* 201-79 Review History Presentations
Mar 1	*Geek Love* 280-348 Review History Presentations
Mar 4	Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birthmark" (1843)
Mar 6	First Essay due
Mar 8	Midterm examination
Mar 11-15	Spring Break
Mar 18	Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* pp. 3-45
Mar 20	*Mrs. Dalloway* 46-88
Mar 22	*Mrs. Dalloway* 89-131
Mar 25	*Mrs. Dalloway* 132-74 Review History Presentations
Mar 27	*Mrs. Dalloway* 175-213 Review History Presentations
Mar 29	*The Hours* (Dir. Stephen Daldry; 2002; in-class viewing)
Apr 1	continue viewing of *The Hours*
Apr 3	finish *The Hours*
Apr 5	In-class debate on *The Hours*: Ruth Hoberman (EIU Woolf scholar) vs. me Review Presentation Work of fiction must be published; text of work as well as rationale due, beginning of class

Apr 8	Ian McEwan, *Saturday* pp. 3-51
Apr 10	*Saturday* 55-117
Apr 12	*Saturday* 121-72
Apr 15	*Saturday* 175-233 Review History Presentations
Apr 17	*Saturday* 237-79 Review History Presentations
Apr 19	Martin Amis, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" (2006)
Apr 22	Hermann Melville, *Benito Cereno* (1855)
Apr 24	Melville, *Bartleby, The Scrivener* (1853)
Apr 27	Final essay due, beginning of class

Final examination date and time TBA